



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

First Sunday of Lent Cycle A



Temptation of Jesus: Mosaic in the basilica of San Marco



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Prayer of St. Catherine of Siena

“My Nature is Fire”

In your nature, eternal Godhead,
I shall come to know my nature.
And what is my nature, boundless love?
It is fire,
because you are nothing but a fire of love.
And you have given humankind
a share in this nature,
for by the fire of love you created us.
And so with all other people
and every created thing;
you made them out of love.
O ungrateful people!
What nature has your God given you?
His very own nature!
Are you not ashamed to cut yourself off from such a noble thing
through the guilt of deadly sin?
O eternal Trinity, my sweet love!
You, light, give us light.
You, wisdom, give us wisdom.
You, supreme strength, strengthen us.
Today, eternal God,
let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth in truth,
with a free and simple heart.
God, come to our assistance!
Lord, make haste to help us!

Amen.

Catholic
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& Creed**
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The first two Sundays of Lent present the temptation of Jesus and his transfiguration.
- ▶ Jesus is led into the desert; he is victorious over and against the onslaught of the devil.
- ▶ The *desert* in biblical parlance immediately evokes a place of testing, a place of trial and tribulation and a place free from the distractions of the world.
- ▶ The first reading in all three cycles reminds us that God revealed himself to humanity from the very beginning of creation. What God began at the world's genesis would come to fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Christ—the Paschal Mystery.
- ▶ Today's liturgy is a reminder that the battle against evil continues and that along with Jesus we are to fight against it in all its forms.
- ▶ The readings of Lent prepare the faithful to renew their baptismal vows and yearly baptismal commitment of discipleship at Easter.
- ▶ Lent is a time-out for all the faithful to consciously engage in metanoia—a complete turning of one's life to God and a turning away from sin.
- ▶ Today those preparing for baptism at Easter will celebrate the rite of election with the bishop. They will enroll their names for baptism and celebrate that God has chosen them to be part of his household of faith. Following the rite they will be referred to as the *elect*.
- ▶ Lent is a time that the elect more seriously prepare for the Easter sacraments through the disciplines of Lent, through the penitential rituals of Lent called scrutinies, through the initiation rituals and retreat experiences of the community.
- ▶ The elect and all the faithful are invited down from the parapet into the desert of interior reflection as we prepare our hearts to more fully enter into the Paschal Mystery of Christ in Holy Week.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Genesis 2, 7-9; 3, 1-7

- ▶ Genesis is the first book in the Bible. The word means beginning or origin.
- ▶ The authors were intent upon recording the spiritual importance of the events of history since its very beginning.
- ▶ The writers were unaware of the millions of years of history that went before them. Unlike some Christian traditions, the Catholic Church believes that the world's two million year old history is not at odds with biblical history.
- ▶ The authors of Genesis intended to lead the people of Israel into an awareness of

their history in order to appreciate the way in which God formed them as his own people.

- ▶ A small section of the work deals with the origins of life. The rest records the life and actions of the patriarchs and the people who were in reciprocal, covenant relationship with God.
- ▶ One of the authors of the first books of the Bible known as the Yahwist (there were three others the Eloist; Deuteronomist; Priestly) was a poet, story teller and theologian who was concerned with illustrating in grand epic style God's intimate, covenant relationship with the people from the very beginning of creation. The author created a theology that underpinned God's saving plan for the world.
- ▶ The entire Book of Genesis is also an extended meditation on the mystery of life, death, sin and evil.
- ▶ Genesis uses the medium of legend and story (observed particularly in the creation accounts) that harken back to popular creation myths of the era known as the Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish and the Saga of Eden, a popular Canaanite and Akkadian story.
- ▶ The stories and legends were used to reveal deeper theological truths about the spiritual and religious significance of human events, particularly humanity's fall from God's grace.
- ▶ Some scholars have suggested that the serpent and forbidden fruit story is in direct response to a Canaanite fertility cult.
- ▶ When Genesis was written there was no belief in the human soul. It was believed that God breathed life into the human being and without that life-breath the human would return to the dirt of the earth.
- ▶ In today's story from Genesis God created a perfect, peace-filled, harmonious world. All life existed in right order and right relationship with God. Then human beings sinned. They thought they could take care of themselves and ceased to rely on God's power and presence in their lives.
- ▶ Human beings destroyed the peace and harmony of the Garden of Eden.
- ▶ They no longer relied on God's sovereignty in their lives. They made idols of themselves!
- ▶ The name Adam meant *everyman*. We are to place ourselves in Adam's stead. We too are that *everyman* who often places ourselves on a pedestal higher than God's pedestal.
- ▶ Adam and Eve's story is as relevant today as it was when it was told. It is the human story—it is our story.
- ▶ People through the ages love to put the blame for Adam's sin on Eve's shoulders. Paul however does not even mention her. He blames Adam and no one else for his own transgression. Not that women/Eve are without sin—everyone sins; we are all guilty each in our own way. No one can blame their actions on anyone else. "He made me do it" just does not fly when it comes to our responsibility for sin.
- ▶ We choose to sin; it is a free choice. The more we freely choose sin, the more difficult it is to break its hold on us and the more difficult it becomes to choose virtue and grace.

- ▶ Adam and Eve's nakedness was not only an awareness of their sexual differences, but it was also a reference to their guilt and shame.
- ▶ They believed in their own superiority to such an extent that they thought they could be like God. They chose their own aggrandizement over and above the majesty of God.
- ▶ God's mercy was greater than their sin. In the words of Shakespeare, "hope sprang eternal" in the lives of our first parents.
- ▶ If human beings repented of their sin and turned from their wicked ways God would listen and forgive and reconcile them to himself. The covenant could be restored.
- ▶ The story of the fall is also a message of hope that ends with a song of trust and hope in God's mercy: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the lesson in this reading? How could this possibly be a word for us today?
- ▶ In what way do we today think we can be like God?
- ▶ In what way do we continue to destroy the peace and harmony God intended for us?
- ▶ What are the ongoing effects of our sinfulness when it comes to our relationship with God?

Second Reading: Romans 5, 12-19

- ▶ Paul tells the Roman community that Adam sank into sin and death whereas Christ opened the way to freedom and new life.
- ▶ Death is a reference to bondage or oppression. Human beings were in bondage to sin. They descended into death as a result of Adam's sin.
- ▶ Jesus delivered human beings from bondage and oppression. He offered new life—new freedom.
- ▶ Adam took the first step downward into sin. Christ ascended into life and opened the door for the people of God to enjoy new life and freedom from sin. "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam!" How blest we are to know such pure grace!
- ▶ Before the advent of Christ sin darkened the world. With Christ's arrival came the Light that would dispel the darkness.
- ▶ Grace wins out over sin.
- ▶ The letter to the Romans is a reminder that all human beings share a common destiny as a result of the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

- ▶ Adam led all humanity into the mystery of sin. Jesus led them out of that same mystery into the light of grace.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading? What should we be shouting from the rooftops?
- ▶ In what way, if any, do you relate to Adam the sinner?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that Christ freed you from sin? How does that translate in your everyday life?

Gospel: Matthew 4, 1-11

- ▶ Today's Gospel has Jesus fasting forty days and forty nights in the desert.
- ▶ Today's story is not intended as a factual representation of the historical event of Jesus' temptation. It is rather a story of the testing of God's Son. Satan, working indirectly at God's behest, tempts the intended Messiah.
- ▶ Today reads like a Jewish Midrash—a story that serves as a homiletic device that interprets the sacred passages.
- ▶ No doubt the story is based in part on an historical event since there are other passages that relate a struggle with Satan.
- ▶ The bottom line however is to provide a theological reflection on the Sonship of Jesus.
- ▶ Spirits abounded in the ancient world. When a voice called out to Jesus from heaven, every eyebrow would have been raised yet not surprised as encounters of this sort would have been expected.
- ▶ The people would have understood the implications of the event.
- ▶ When the voice affirmed Jesus as Son the spirits of the netherworld would have taken notice and tried to challenge him.
- ▶ Jesus was led by God's Spirit to the ultimate place of testing—the desert.

Connection with Abraham and Isaac.

- ▶ The story of Jesus' temptation evokes the testing of Abraham. Jesus became one with Isaac and Abraham as he placed himself on the cross [altar] of sacrifice.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four.

- ▶ Have you ever experienced God testing you? If not, how do you imagine that would happen?
- ▶ What do you think God wanted you to learn from the test he gave you?

Connection with Israel.

- ▶ Just as Jesus was tested in the desert so too were the people of Israel tested in the desert.
- ▶ Jesus' forty day fast calls to mind the forty years in the desert and the forty day fasting of Moses.
- ▶ Israel failed when tested; Jesus did not.

First test.

- ▶ There were three tests in the desert. The first involved hunger. God tested the faithfulness of Israel before he fed them manna. Israel doubted that God would provide for them.
- ▶ Jesus would not be manipulated into using God's power in order to feed his hunger. He certainly believed God had the ability to change rocks into bread but he chose instead to wait on God's benevolence—not on a flashy show of power.
- ▶ Life comes from God. We draw breath according to God's will and pleasure.

Second test.

- ▶ Jesus was tested a second time reminiscent of the test of Israel in which they doubted that God would take care of them. They were thirsty. They clamored for water and demanded that Moses provide it. They argued with God. God told them to strike the water and water would appear.
- ▶ The miracle was called Meribah which in Hebrew meant "to quarrel." Massah in Hebrew meant "to test."
- ▶ God proves his sovereignty over all creation by providing water and food when there was no water and food in the wilderness.
- ▶ The people demonstrated their own sinfulness and lack of trust. In so doing they broke the covenant they forged with God.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four.

- ▶ Have you ever tested God before?
- ▶ Can you think of a situation in which you wanted to test God?
- ▶ How do you think God would respond to you if you tested him like the Israelites tested God?
- ▶ What does this reading tell us about God?

The third test.

- ▶ Jesus again avoided a flashy show of divine power. He refused to be manipulated by the tease to throw himself to the ground from the height of the parapet knowing that God would save him. Again, such an abuse of God's sovereignty and power was unthinkable for Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus had no intention of testing God.
- ▶ Jesus would worship the Lord God and only God. Some Jewish people/leaders dabbled in pagan idolatry for political purposes. It was believed at the time that the celebrated gods of the pantheon were agents of Satan.
- ▶ Jesus' third test affirmed that Jesus would remain faithful in the face of political enticements. He would not succumb to customary lining of one's own pocket to further one's own career or state in life. Jesus would not compromise his loyalty to God—not even a little—as many prominent Jewish leaders had done. He had one Master and one Master only—the Lord God Almighty.
- ▶ We must ask ourselves how such a story could possibly have any relevance in our lives today.
- ▶ It would be easy for us to think that Jesus knew little of the real temptations we face today. Few of us will be asked to jump from a temple parapet. What implications can we draw today? How do Jesus' temptations speak to our own temptations toward unfaithfulness, addictions, abuse, etc.?



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four.

- ▶ Drawing from experiences in your own life, how would you answer the following question: what implications can we draw today? How do Jesus' temptations speak to our own temptations toward unfaithfulness, addictions, abuse, etc.?
- ▶ The ultimate temptation Jesus faced in these stories is to forget that God is God; God is sovereign; God is Lord and Master of the Universe; God provides for human beings.
- ▶ Today's world not only denies God's sovereignty, it denies God altogether. God is not only denied, he is ridiculed and mocked.
- ▶ The temptations of today are less dramatic [most of the time] than finding ourselves wrestling with Satan on the nearest rooftop. We might, however, be

tempted to ignore the plight of God's people, thus negating God's covenant with us. We might be tempted to doubt God's providential care in our lives and refuse to trust the experience of God in our lives. We also might be tempted to over indulge in the material goods of this world. We might be distracted from our purposeful, God-given lives and ignore the necessity of giving God due honor and praise.

- ▶ Christ struggled in the desert and in so doing taught us how to resist similar temptation in our lives today and in every generation.
- ▶ Jesus was taken to a mountain peak—a place of encounter and God's revelation. Jesus was offered everything in the world if he would betray his Father.
- ▶ Israel betrayed God in the face of such temptation; Jesus did not.
- ▶ Israel was the disobedient, unfaithful child. Jesus was the obedient, faithful Son.
- ▶ Jesus and Satan went to the mat of battle and Jesus was victorious.
- ▶ Today's Gospel could also be a modern commentary on the abuse and misuse of power. We abuse and misuse it in our homes, at work and in our national consciousness.
- ▶ As Lent begins we are called to reflect on the ways we engage in sin—not just individual laundry list of sins, but also our participation in the sinister sin in which we turn a blind eye to the abuse of power in multiple venues.
- ▶ The abuse of power is not just a national or world-wide phenomenon. It takes place in almost every human institution. Today's Gospel fortifies us to resist its attractive, seductive lure in our lives.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life.

- ▶ What spoke to you the most in today's Gospel?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel in your life today?
- ▶ What way, if any, in any system that you belong, do you see the abuse of power—either in yourself or others around you? What can be done to curb the abuse?
- ▶ What does today's reading teach us about the role of Jesus in God's saving plan?
- ▶ Jesus was tempted. What ways are you tempted? Is it a sin to be tempted? What is the sin when it comes to temptation?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat opening prayer

OR Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

Appendix

My husband recently encountered a man on the streets who was in a precarious situation. He was a hard working family man who traveled to Orlando from Tennessee. His car broke down and he spent all the money he had having it towed. His wife was sending him money but she was not going to be paid for several days. He needed the help of a Good Samaritan. My husband gave him ten dollars.

The man then proceeded to tell my husband what had happened to him earlier in the day. He asked another man for help who told him to wait by an ATM machine and he would come back and help him. The poor man waited two hours and the man never came back.

He asked another well-dressed, wealthy looking man if he could spare five or ten dollars to help him. The man said he would be glad to help him and instructed the poor man to follow him to his car. When he arrived at his expensive, luxury car, he opened the car door, took out a piece of paper and pen and then told the man:

“You want help?” I’ll help you. Here, take this piece of paper and write to Obama about your situation. Maybe he will give a damn because I surely do not!” He then proceeded to slam the door on the man and speed away.

It is one thing to deny help to a stranger. It is quite another to demean that person and to behave like a powerful, arrogant overlord. The wealthy man demonstrated a flashy show of dominance and in the process denigrated the poor man’s human dignity. If he did not want to help the man or if he felt the man was taking advantage of him he simply could have refused to help him.

There are many ways we are tempted to fail in our responsibility to live according to the covenant God forged with humanity. It is a good bet that when we succumb to prideful, arrogant self aggrandizement we place ourselves on that temple parapet or the mountain top and rather than resist the temptation to give in to the abuse of power, wealth and arrogant self-sufficiency, we embrace it and then become a slave to it. Those things, like Satan, then become our master.

Jesus reminds us that such temptation is a distraction with the potential to dangerously get in the way of our relationship with God. We will be tempted—of that we can be certain. Lent is a time to pray for the strength to resist temptation and to grow in intimate, reciprocal relationship with God. That relationship requires that we accept God’s sovereignty in our lives and care for those who cannot care for themselves as a sign of God’s love for us.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Overview of Lent
Sin and Grace
Sacrament of Reconciliation
Baptism

Jesus Christ
Holy Spirit
Sacraments

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

OVERVIEW OF LENT

On this First Sunday of Lent it is most appropriate to spend extended time reflecting upon the season and what it celebrates. Thus today's doctrinal session will focus on an OVERVIEW OF THE SEASON OF LENT.

SIN AND GRACE

Today's story from Genesis is an extended reflection on the mystery of sin and evil and the origins of life and death. The first five chapters of Romans is a reflection on humanity's downfall as a result of Adam's sin, and Satan's temptation of Jesus to treat God as less than God. It is a temptation we all face throughout our lives. If ever there was a liturgy devoted to the reflection on sin and grace, today is that liturgy. Thus, today our doctrinal session will focus on SIN AND GRACE.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Today's story from Genesis is an extended reflection on the mystery of sin and evil and the origins of life and death. The first five chapters of Romans is a reflection on humanity's downfall as a result of Adam's sin, and Satan's temptation of Jesus to treat God as less than God. It is a temptation we all face throughout our lives. The Church continues Jesus' saving reconciling mission through the sacraments. The remedy for humanity's sin today can be found in the sacrament of Eucharist which re-presents God's saving mission on the cross, and the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation is a celebration of God's incredible mercy extended to sinners. It is thus fitting that today our doctrinal session will focus on the sacrament of RECONCILIATION.

BAPTISM

Today's rite of sending for election and rite of election for the elect who are preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil catapults the Church on its yearly role in preparation for the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. It is thus most appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on the sacrament of BAPTISM.

JESUS CHRIST

Today's Gospel is intended to tell the story of the testing of God's Son. The *Christ as God's Son* theology is a primary theme. Jesus is God's beloved, who inaugurates his ministry by being tested in the desert. Today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on Jesus Christ.

HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit leads Jesus to the desert and empowers him for the mission he is about to undertake. The Spirit's role is to show Jesus the extent and scope of his mission. Such is the role of the Spirit in our lives—to guide and lead the people of God to continue the saving mission of Christ in the world. Thus, today would be an appropriate occasion to focus our attention on the HOLY SPIRIT.

SACRAMENTS

Sacraments continue Christ's saving mission in our day and our time. We are given access to his ministry through the sacraments. Lent prepares the elect for the sacraments that will incorporate them into the Church at Easter and it prepares the faithful to renew those sacraments for yet another year. It is thus most appropriate that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about sacraments—the celebrations/rituals that bring the healing, reconciling, saving mission of Christ into our midst—that make present the Paschal Mystery of Christ—his life, passion, death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Thus today our doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about SACRAMENTS.